Women's Travel Writing

Fran Bartkowski

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 36, Number 2, 1993, pp. 242-245 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/373416/summary
[Due to] the frequency with which tree imagery appears in her fiction at the moment of spiritual crisis... Schreiner’s name change may have been a self-baptism into the symbolic meaning of the olive tree, its branch of peace and its consecrating oil.

Such comments are exaggerated and misplaced, and serve only to undercut the occasionally fine readings of the texts themselves.

Yet, despite such interpretive infelicities, Monsman has, on balance, given us much to think about. While he fails to explore fully the implications of Schreiner’s narrative style, he does, at the very least, force us to take a closer look at Schreiner’s fiction as a separate body of work, to consider its aesthetic coherence as well as the ways in which it is markedly distinct from the author’s nonfiction. Indeed, her nonfiction works such as Woman and Labour have received more attention in the twentieth century; in 1968, Uys Krige wrote in her introduction to Olive Schreiner: A Selection that Schreiner displays a “lack of development” in her art, and that “she was not, intrinsically, a novelist.” Yet Schreiner’s letters reveal her unusual attachment to her fictional works, a sense that they were quite important to their creator. In a letter to Karl Pearson in 1886, she wrote of her unpublished fiction manuscripts: “I often try to burn them, and it gives me such pain. It seems as if I were burning the people in them.” It is to Monsman’s credit that he reminds us of the central role that Schreiner’s fiction writing played in her life. This first comprehensive study of that fiction should initiate a broader dialogue on the subject.

Janet Galligani Casey
College of the Holy Cross

Women’s Travel Writing


AS BOOKS OF TRAVEL DO, and literary criticism of travel writing at its best ought to do, Sara Mills’s book occupies and explores several crossroads: the title and subtitle tell us what some of those intersections are called and how they are to be negotiated, as well as which categories will be mapped out along the trail. Mills does some very careful cartography for the reader who wonders which questions matter most to an analysis of women’s travel writing. Like some maps “of old” that seemed to spend more effort representing the monsters at the margins of the unknown “world” than in drawing the outlines of the topography of the
known, Mills has some of her very own vexatious critical monsters to position at the periphery so that the questions that started and kept this effort moving along can remain in focus.

A critical Foucauldian and feminist, Mills wants to color in some of the specificity lacking in discourse analysis and guard against some of the reductiveness that can dull the edge of feminist work. This book represents a significant contribution to complicating the theoretical issues involved in gendered readings of literary genres, particularly the travel narrative; additionally, it asks us to recognize the complexities that are necessitated by the crossing of a gender analysis of domination with those forms of domination and exploitation in place in various colonial and, consequently, post-colonial settings.

Mills tells her readers early that she “will be arguing that women’s travel texts are produced and received within a context which shares similarities with the discursive construction and reception of male texts, whilst at the same time . . . there may be negotiations in women’s texts which result in differences which may seem to be due to gender.” What leaves this reader impatient is how much time Mills seems to spend packing her bags for this critical journey before getting on the road. The introduction and one early chapter, “Feminist Work on Women’s Travel Writing,” are both rather painstaking discussions about why Foucault is an apt and worthier traveling/theoretical companion than either Lacan or Kristeva. The dismissal of the psychoanalytic as a pertinent category for discussing just how women negotiate their texts as opposed to men is counter-intuitive, I dare say, and a move that has haunted feminist work and left it blunted in its potential for critique. Not that I want to suggest that the psychoanalytic is necessary for Mills to succeed in pressing her claims, but the fact that her dismissal is so cursory and superficial is surprising as is her claim that the women’s texts she will go on to examine are “all surface” (11). While this assertion, coming early on, might lead a reader to expect a postmodern rejection of depth analysis, à la Baudrillard or many others, that is not where Mills’s anti-psychoanalytic stance is lodged. In fact, had she not jettisoned the psychoanalytic from her analysis Mills might not need to “have adopted such a tortuous route” (37).

Some of the consequences of this position are not clear until the second half of the text where we are taken along for the textual ride with Alexandra David-Neel (My Journey to Lhasa, 1927); Mary Kingsley (Travels in West Africa, 1897); and Nina Mazuchelli (The Indian Alps
and How We Crossed Them, 1876). In Mills’s readings of these texts it becomes all too apparent how the lack of a gender perspective inflected by questions of the unconscious produces a repeated scene: Mills juxtaposes fascinating passages in the writings of her women travelers with the most compelling theoretical questions, but the partiality that lets these passages go begging for more insight is very disappointing. It is as if Mills had chosen to take two suitcases of Foucault where one Foucault and one of Lacan’s Freud would have served much better, together with some contemporary feminist psychoanalytic and film theory on women looking at men, women and each other. Mills says that her “problem with psychoanalytic readings . . . is their lack of address to the specificity of power relations” (45); indeed, but here is where the Foucauldian apparatus and the feminist agenda might make very comfortable common cause. And whether “Lacanian psychoanalysis . . . is doomed simply to see all materials in terms of those [binary] oppositions” may be the result of feminists refusing to engage with its paradigms in a dialectical and resisting way—just as they have needed to do with Foucault to make optimal use of his insights and methods.

After persuading readers about why Foucault but not Lacan, “Gender and the Study of Colonial Discourse” aims to situate this work in terms of the question of why or why not Said’s Orientalism. Here Mills is on surer ground since there is a growing group of articles and books on imperialism and colonialism that takes issue with Said, and amplifies where his project only suggested. However, Mills undercuts and over-simplifies her own work when she distinguishes her efforts from Said’s by allowing that because the “writing of western women in the colonial period rarely underwent conversion to official status . . . their work remains at the level of the personal” (51). The important point Mills makes at the end of this chapter is that women have remained unconceptualized as agents of colonialism, though not absent as stereotypes and figures: “the British memsahib, in need of protection from potential sexual threat” being the one with most currency, and her near kin the eccentric and indomitable spinster.

To take the very rich materials of women’s travel writing and lead the reader to the over-inclusive discourses of femininity to explain the intense internal contradictions that Mills has exposed is to stop short of the potential for some generative analysis in favor of artful juxtaposition without sufficient commentary. In fact, Mills has arrayed many of the rhetorical strategies of women travel writers which lay bare some of the
instability of colonial discourses, but Foucault casts too long a shadow over Mills's best work here. The model of constraints on the production and reception of women's travel writing is made to seem more helpful and useful than it turns out to be, I think. Again, it is when Mills listens well that she turns into her own best native informant—in the passages where Mills realizes that women travelers and writers put to their own "feminized" uses the discourse and behaviors of "going native" we begin to see how the theoretical intersections of gender, colonialism, critique of ideology and imperialism can become a very active and productive crossroads in the marketplace of ideas. Mills acknowledges the "unwieldy" readings she has produced in search and in the name of a "gendered colonial discourse study" (195). She has done an excellent job of "gendering" earlier work by critics such as Dennis Porter, Percy Adams, Paul Russell and Peter Hulme, among others. In closing her book, Mills speaks to the hope that the potential disclosed by her work will produce new studies; I can only share that hope.

Fran Bartkowski
Rutgers University

Detective Fiction


In his introduction, Paul explains that Whatever Happened to Sherlock Holmes? "is not specifically about Sherlock Holmes, but it is about the significance of the whole body of detective literature, because its subject matter is concerned with 'setting things right.' It is about characters like Conan Doyle's sage of Baker Street who were convinced that they had a vocation to engage in the enterprise. . . ." Arguing that detective stories reflect secular theology, Paul lists the ethical and moral principles which he finds present in detective fiction: Created Order, Providence, Justice and Truth, Value of Human Life, and Fallen Nature. He then proposes to consider how these may be applied to British and American detective stories and to examine the theological implications of the genre.

British authors of the 1880–1920 period with whom Paul deals at any length are Doyle, Chesterton, and Baroness Orczy. He also discusses briefly H. F. Wood's The Passenger from Scotland Yard (1888) and Israel Zangwill's The Big Bow Mystery (1892), misdated 1895 by Paul, and